

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 155

By Brown

A RESOLUTION to request the State Capitol Commission to initiate the creation of a sculpture to commemorate the first African Americans who served in the Tennessee General Assembly.

WHEREAS, with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in February of 1870, African American men were enfranchised to participate in the democratic process with the right to vote and take part in the affairs of government; and

WHEREAS, in November 1872, two and one-half years after the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, Tennessee voters elected their first African American representative to the General Assembly, Representative Sampson W. Keeble of Nashville, who would serve from 1873-1875 in the 38th Tennessee General Assembly; and

WHEREAS, fourteen African American men would serve in the Tennessee General Assembly during the Reconstruction Era: Sampson W. Keeble, Republican, Davidson County; John W. Boyd, Republican, Tipton County; Thomas Frank Cassels, Republican, Shelby County; Isham F. Norris, Republican, Shelby County; Thomas A. Sykes, Republican, Davidson County; Samuel A. McElwee, Republican, Haywood County; David Foote Rivers, Republican, Fayette County; Leonard Howard, Republican, Shelby County; Green E. Evans, Republican, Shelby County; William A. Fields, Republican, Shelby County; William C. Hodge, Republican, Hamilton County; Styles Linton Hutchins, Republican, Hamilton County; Monroe W. Gooden, Democrat, Fayette County; and Jesse M.H. Graham, Republican, Montgomery County; and

WHEREAS, the achievements of these fourteen men, some of them former enslaved persons, who served as Tennessee legislators before 1900, represent an important part of Tennessee history; and

WHEREAS, within this group of inspiring individuals was an original member of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Representative Green E. Rivers; the first African American attorney admitted to

the Georgia bar, Representative Styles Linton Hutchins; and the legal counsel to civil rights pioneer Ida B. Wells, Representative Thomas F. Cassels; and

WHEREAS, collectively during their respective terms in the General Assembly, these men introduced legislation seeking to expand opportunities for African Americans in Tennessee and fought valiantly to stem the growing tide of "Jim Crow" laws that would eventually silence the political voice of millions of African Americans until the civil rights movement nearly a century later; and

WHEREAS, during his second legislative term, then 26-year-old Representative Samuel A. McElwee was nominated to be Speaker of the House of Representatives, and he received 32 of the 93 votes cast; it was during this term that Representative McElwee delivered a passionate oration in the House pleading for stronger statutory sanctions against lynch mobs; and

WHEREAS, Representative McElwee's speech, which referred to three recent Tennessee lynchings, included these words: "Great God, when will this Nation treat the Negro as an American citizen? ... As a humble representative of the Negro race, and as a member of this body, I stand here to-day and wave the flag of truce between the races and demand a reformation in southern society by the passage of this bill." Despite his eloquence, the bill was tabled by a vote of 41-36; and

WHEREAS, with the end of the 45th General Assembly in March of 1887, Representatives Samuel A. McElwee, Styles Linton Hutchins, and Monroe Gooden would be the last African Americans to serve in the General Assembly until Representative A. W. Willis, Jr. was elected in Shelby County in 1964; and

WHEREAS, the history of the first African American legislators to serve in the Tennessee General Assembly during the 19th century must be commemorated and shared with the Tennesseans of today and those yet to come; now, therefore

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ONE HUNDRED FIFTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE SENATE CONCURRING, that the State Capitol Commission is hereby requested to initiate the creation of a sculpture to honor and commemorate the first African Americans who served in the Tennessee General Assembly.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the State Capitol Commission may request the Tennessee Arts Commission to sponsor a contest, which will be open to all interested artists, to select such a sculpture.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the sculpture should preferably be a bust bearing the likeness of the first African American member of the Tennessee General Assembly, Representative Sampson W. Keeble, or other early African American member, and shall be comparable in size to those busts currently on display in the State Capitol building.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the State Capitol Commission and the Tennessee Arts Commission shall be responsible for selecting the appropriate submission for such contest and determining the final choice.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the selected sculpture shall be funded by specific state appropriation, and shall be placed and displayed on the second floor of the State Capitol building no later than 2010.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the State Capitol Commission is also authorized to seek private donations to cover the cost of the statute and related expenses.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that enrolled copies of this resolution be transmitted to both the State Capitol Commission and the Tennessee Arts Commission.